



Growing Strange by Michael-hearteyes-wheeler

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Max M., Mike W., Will B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-03-23 23:28:28

Updated: 2018-04-18 21:39:08

Packaged: 2019-12-16 23:04:16

Rating: T

Chapters: 2

Words: 8,317

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The Party of six, against the world. At least, that's how it felt. Friends since childhood, growing up together, falling in love, and finding themselves. It seemed as though nothing could ever tear them apart, until the day when something does. A Mileven childhood bestfriends, to high school sweethearts, to 'the one that got away' AU.

1. When Four Became Six

Hello Everyone! So this is a little project I have been working on for a few weeks and I am excited to get it going! This started as an idea from one of my wonderful mutuals on Tumblr (claudia-henderson) and I ran with it.

Get ready for some angst, some friendship bonding, and some more angst!

Mike Wheeler stood on a bridge in a park he had never been on, in a part of the city he had never been too, and waited for whatever was coming next, the outcome uncertain. He had always been so careful, so calculating, and meticulous, so how had everything turned to shit?

Why was he standing by himself on this bridge overlooking the busy city streets just beyond the park feeling so uncertain?

The water bubbled through under his feet, the moonlight shining of each ripple as if there were stars in its depths. It was quiet, much quieter than a typical night in the city, but he contributed that to the trees surrounding the park. It had been a long time since he saw trees like this. There aren't many plants in the city, other than weeds that make their way through cracks in the pavement.

That's how he felt. Like an ugly weed, trying desperately to grow in an environment that didn't want him. Like an alien trying to blend in on a different planet. And though he grew, because he did in fact grow, he was still just a weed. A nuisance. Something that didn't belong.

He watched the last of the sun disappear behind taller buildings, and the inky black of night cover everything like a blanket. Neon lights illuminated the darkness beyond the park, and lights flickered on in high rise windows. He saw people silhouetted in their homes, and he wondered when he would feel at *home*.

He took a deep breathe and thought over everything that had led him to this point. Everything that had come before.

No one really *likes* school, not even nerds, but there is just something about the excitement of the first day that makes you forget all about the year of stress, deadlines, exams, and papers ahead of you.

Mike skidded to a stop just in front of Dustin's house like planned, with Lucas at his side. Their mothers collectively decided they were old enough now to ride their bikes to school together, so long as they went in a group. They were big time middle schoolers now.

Will and Dustin were already waiting, and with a few excited cheers and greetings, the party was off, speeding towards school and a new year.

Middle school is different because you have a new teacher for every subject. It was just as thrilling as it was confusing. The boys traded schedules to see which classes they shared (thankfully all but two) and went along together, meeting new teacher after new teacher, sitting at desk after desk.

There had been some excitement about the possibility of reinventing themselves. Breaking the social chains of nerdism and coming out on top. That excitement fizzled away when each of the faces they met were the same ones they already knew. That, combined with Troy tripping Dustin in the hallway were pretty substantial indicators that their dorky status would remain. At least they had each other.

Somewhat comfortingly, school lunches suck no matter what grade you are in. Mike and his friends claimed a table at the back of the cafeteria as their own. The table you sat at made a big difference where you were as far as social standings, so they choose quickly. It was in the back by the door that lead out to the 'playground' of sorts (which was really just a cement lot and a couple tether-balls). It was far away from where the more popular and older kids sat, but not in the corner that all of the really weird kids were huddled in. It was perfect for their little gang.

There was a lot of bright-eyed, first day of school, naivety that they shared. Most of their teachers seemed alright. They were especially giddy with the new Science teacher, Mr. Clark, and his open invitation for anyone to join the AV club. Lucas was excited about the

prospect of reclaiming his title as dodgeball champion with a new group of individuals to compete against. Will was thrilled about his art class and its teacher, a spazzy red headed woman with coke-bottle glasses. Mike and Dustin chatted eagerly about the upcoming science fairs and tournaments they would get to compete in. All in all, it seemed like it was going to be a good year.

There had been buzz all day about some of the older kids that people remembered from before they moved on to middle school, as well as the small handful of new kids.

Mike looked around the cafeteria for any unfamiliar faces, scouting potential new friends to make a good impression on, as well as potential threats, and that when he saw *her*.

The new girl. The one everyone had been talked about. She was carrying her plastic tray and looking around the room nervously. Her eyes were big and dark, like a doe's eyes when you drive by them on a lonely country highway. Her hair was a mess of caramel curls swirling around her head, and her cheeks had the faintest hint of blush. She wandered further down the room, eyeing groups of kids seated at tables, laughing with people they already knew, and looking for anywhere safe to sit.

Then and there, Mike made a bold decision, especially for him, and waved at her. She brushed one of her curls from her face and smiled, and the rest, as they say, was history. He had no idea the gravity of that simple gesture, or that it was going to set the rest of his life into place. He just knew that something about her made his heart flutter a little faster.

The new kid always gets a lot of attention in a town like Hawkins. Where everyone knows everyone, and you graduate with the same kids you knew on your first day of kindergarten, but El was different. She was like sunshine. Like a ray of light spilling into Hawkins Middle Schools hallways, filling them with laughter and her radiant smile. She was nice to everyone, and everyone wanted to get to know her. The beautiful new girl, with the twinkle in her eye, and the pep in her step, and the sunny disposition.

Lucky for The Party, however, she was also desperately dorky. She

often stumbled over her words, she had a painfully short temper, she wasn't that great at athletics, and she always had her head buried in a book. All it took was El seeing Wills doodles in English, commenting on how 'I'm more of a sorcerer type myself. Blood lineage magical is way better than learned magic' and she was in.

She made up The Party's fifth member, and she was socially cemented to them for life. Not that anyone was complaining.

Apparently El (short for Eleanor) was the New police chief's daughter. Her mom had gotten really sick when she was born, and died a few years ago, but her father and her were closer than most families. El was fun. Like really fun.

It wasn't uncommon for her to challenge Lucas in a race to the end of some street, or the top of some hill. It became a routine for her and Dustin to spend hours in the library, researching rare plants, or exotic animals just for the fun of it. Her and Will would doodle together, and shared headphones while they all sat and ate lunch. And her and Mike were inseparable.

El was the newest fixture to the Wheeler's house. Coming in through the basement door without even knocking most of the time, and watching movies with Mike until they both fell asleep on the couch. They would build elaborate blanket forts, using every single one of Karen's extra blankets. When the entire group was over, they would all put on the silliest combination of dress up clothes they could find and run around the basement reenacting their favorite movie scene, or something from their imagination.

There was something special about their bond. It was unlike any of the other clicks at school. Maybe that's what happens when misfits who don't really have any other option get together, but maybe it was something else entirely. It was like they had all known each other in a past life. Like their souls were intertwined together, and that they would always be bound to each other without choice. It sounds cheesy, but that's how it felt. They were inseparable and over the few months they had known El, she wove into their strange little patchwork like a puzzle piece they had been missing.

There was a day in spring, when the ground finally thawed and the

trees reanimated, that solidified their pact.

The five of them walked home from school, backpacks heavy with books and the air filled with laughter. They decided to take a short cut through the woods on the way to Will's house. Twigs snapped underfoot, Lucas and Dustin bickered about something or other, El and Will held hands (something they always did, because only she knew the secret he kept from the others), and Mike lead the way.

Just as abruptly as a roar of thunder, Troy and James crept up from the other side of a hill, their faces painted with their signature smugness and devilish grins.

"What are you losers doing out here?" Troy sneered.

"Walking." Mike snapped although his head hung, keeping his eyeline just short of thiers.

El hadn't dealt with these idiots in person before, but the stories about them were as numerous as they were revolting. She let go of Will's hand, balling her own into a fist.

"Well these are our woods. No freaks allowed." Troy retorted. James snickered behind him.

"You don't *own* the woods." Lucas crossed his arms.

"We own this part of it. And if you don't get the hell out in the next thirty seconds, im going to have to kick you out." Troy reached in his pocket, and flipped the switch blade hidden within.

Reflexively, the boys all took a couple of steps backward, But not El. She stood her ground.

"We aren't scared of you." El hissed through her teeth.

"Sorry princess, I don't think I was talking to you." Troy got in her face. Dangerously close. Mike felt himself start to boil with anxiety and rage. El remained calm.

"No, but i'm talking to you. We aren't scared of you, but you should be scared of us." El's glare was staggering.

Troy and James laughed and 'Oooohed' at her before the king of the maggots himself turned back to match her gaze. "What are you gonna do huh?" He stepped closer. "You and your little fairy friends gonna cast a spell on me?" Another step. "You gonna run and tell you cop daddy?"

"No." El's voice was deep and intent. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

Troy let out an almost stunned snort of laughter in her face, and before he could reply, El had one arm around the wrist he held the knife in, and the other clenched in a firm fist. In one swift motion, she twisted his arm backwards, making him cry out in pain and sending the knife flying down the hill. With her fist, she clocked him in the jaw and pushed him to the ground.

The boys behind her gasped. James yelled to his friend, and Troy yelped in pain.

"You bitch!" He spat. Stars clouding his vision. He felt blood fill his mouth and his arm was still bent at an unnatural angle.

"Go." Her voice was deadly serious. James helped Troy to his feet, and the two ran away, sliding down the hill and stumbling as fast as their feet could take them. All the while, whining like injured dogs.

"Holy SHIT!" Dustin hollered. "Yeah you better run! She's our friend and she's crazy!"

Lucas whooped in celebration and only then did the feeling come back to her hand. Who knew punching someone hurt so badly? She shook out her tense joints and turned around to see her friends all wide eyed and grinning.

"That was badass!" Lucas cheered.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Will asked astonished.

"My dad taught me self defense when we lived in the city because I was getting picked on at school. I have never had to use it before but... I think a knife is a pretty good excuse." She rubbed circles on her hand, trying to work out the bruises that were surely going to form.

"Are you okay? That looks like it hurts." Mike walked towards her and put her hand in his. She blushed as she traced her knuckles.

"Im fine. Better then fine, actually. That felt awesome." El didn't feel proud, because that wasn't the point, It was the right thing to do. She would punch a million mouthbreathers for her friends.

"You are officially the coolest person ever." Lucas patted her on the shoulder.

She smiled at him. She smiled at all of them. She loved them, each and every one. Dorks or not, they were the best people she could have asked for.

Lucas gave her a piggyback ride all the way to Will's. They recounted the story with fervor to Joyce who laughed pinched El's cheeks.

That evening they stayed out in Will's fort. They talked and laughed and played games and pretended everything was perfect, because in that moment it was. Somewhere along the night, Mikes hands had found El's and he gently rubbed over the bandages Joyce had patched her up with. She blushed and grinned and thanked god above that the other boys didn't tease them

It was like El had always been a part of the group, or at the very least, was always meant to be.

Mike and El, El and Mike. Best friends forever.

One warm summer day, just after seventh grade *finally* came to and end, the pair walked deep into the forest. There, in a clearing, El found a sharp rock, and carved all five of their initials into the trunk of a tall oak tree. After she was finished, with a proud grin, she turned to Mike.

"As long as this tree is alive, we will always be best friends."

That was when, for the second time with El, Mike did something really bold.

He kissed her. There in the field, with the sun shining just a brightly as she made him feel, and the bees buzzing in time with the fluttering

in his chest.

"What was that for?" El said with a slight smirk once they pulled apart.

"Because I like you." Mike teased, rubbing circles on the back of her hand as he held it.

"Oh." Then she kissed him back, and wrapped him in a hug as she did so. "Well I like you back."

Mike and El. El and Mike. Best friends. Bound to each other in the bark of tree, and in their smiles, and kisses, and their hands that from that point on seemed to always be intertwined.

That summer was quite possibly the best time in any of their lives.

Endless days of sleepovers, trips to the arcade, hiking around the woods, movies in the basement, stealing fresh cookies from the kitchen.

El had her own D&D character, even though she had never really played before. Mike helped her get all of the details sorted out so she would be ready for their next campaign. They worked late into the night, getting lost in a fantasy realm and sneaking kisses. Will added her character, a mage with a dark purple cape and long wild hair, to his drawing of the others.

The boys liked to tease the budding romance between El and Mike, even if it was only playful. So Mike and El found lots of ways to hide away from the others. Lots of long walks home as the sunset and the cicadas hummed. Whenever one needed to go 'get something to drink' the other just so happened to want a snack. When Dustin and Lucas would inevitably end up falling asleep first, with Will always soon to follow, the pair would hide inside their fort and whisper and giggle until they returned to their respective sleeping bags.

The police Chief himself, a tall gruff man named Jim, even had to admit to the sweetness between the two. He put up a big front about the whole thing, because 'that's what dads do', but he would let them

say their long sappy goodbyes and ignored their long sappy greetings. He just liked seeing his daughter happy after she had lost her mother, and he his wife. He was glad she had friends, and he was more than relieved to find that her friends were the 'get good grades, never break curfew' type.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end, and the new school year approached all of them like a brick wall. *Eighth graders*. A gaggle of five weirdos taking a stand against all odds. A party of geeks joined at the hip for the last two years.

It was only a month or so after that, that another new girl moved to town. She had fiery hair, and a temperament to match. She was known first by her code name, topping the charts at the arcade, and second by her attitude. Brash, feisty, quick witted, and painstakingly cool. From the first moment she skated down the hill towards school, face formed in a nonchalant grimace, Lucas and Dustin swooned.

"Woah." They echoed each other as she past.

Then in Mr. Clark's first period science, a class they all fought to share for the third year in a row, she was introduced as Max, and that's when the correlations were made.

It was a few painful days of Lucas and Dustin watching her from afar, Mike rolling his eyes and gripping about the 'impossibility of reaching a score that high' and Will being ambivalent.

"Why don't you just go talk to her?" Mike huffed, finally having had enough.

"Are you kidding? She is so cool. She would probably laugh in our faces." Dustin argued.

"She isn't *that* cool." Mike crossed his arms, although he knew she was.

El, being ever the brazen one, watched her intently, deciding enough was enough. "I'm going to go talk to her."

There were some concerned objections, but El ignored them. She knew what it was like to be the new kid. She knew what it was like

to be the person everyone stared at during lunch, while you sat alone. And she desperately wanted another girl in the mix.

"Hey, you're Max right?" El said with a warm smile.

"Yeah. Its umm... Eleanor?" Max jumped from her board and stepped on the curved edge, making it rise effortlessly into her hands.

"Yep, but I go by El."

"And you're friends with the stalkers?" Max smirked.

"The who?" El followed Max's pointing gaze to the boys standing at the other end of the courtyard. As soon as they realized they weren't being a covert as they hoped, they whipped around. "Oh them. Yep, those are mine." She felt herself grin, she loved her nosey little idiots.

"Anyway, I wanted to invite you hang out with us at the arcade tonight." El turned her attention back to the redhead. "Madmax."

"Sounds cool, i'll see you there." Max smiled softly. There was something short of surprise in her eyes, but also familiar elation. The same kind El had felt the day Mike asked her to sit with them.

She walked back to the boys and rolled her eyes at their forced casualness. Lucas was actually whistling.

"So... uh... how did it go?" Dustin muttered.

"She thinks you are all creepy."

"What!?" All four boys yelled in unison.

"Yeah. called you stalkers. Guess you're going to have to apologize when we hang out with her at the arcade later." El smirked, pulling Mikes arm over her shoulders.

Lucas and Dustin cheered, Will grinned, and Mike tried to not be a downer.

That day, the party got their sixth member. The 'Totally Tubular' Madmax Mayfield.

It's kind of one of those weird things. When you discover something new, and you wonder where its been your whole life? That's how it felt for the boys when they met El. They always thought there quartet was complete, them against the world, but then here came this new girl and she filled in gaps they didn't even know existed.

It was the same way with Max.

El never realized how badly she needed a 'girlfriend' until Max was apart of the group. Sure she could talk to any of the boys about any of her problems (and vice versa) and they would listen, but it didn't always mean they empathized. They didn't have to deal with period cramps, or have tampons to lend. They didn't worry about their hair (not that Max really did either, but she understood) or what to wear on a date. El couldn't complain about Mike to any of them as easily she could with Max, and there was certainly no one better at making fun of them the way Max did.

Max was awesome. She kicked ass at video games, knew about all of the best movies, was crazy smart, and super down to earth. She was a soft heart in a hard shell. A spit-fire attitude with a keen mind. Max made The Party complete.

Before long it was like she had always been there. Karen set an extra plate at the table for dinners, Joyce made extra popcorn on movie nights, there was a little less room on the couch in Mikes basement, and an extra character in their D&D games.

Max insisted on being a 'Zoomer', A class of her own design. Mike allowed it (well, was more or less forced into it) and helped her design that character. It ended up being just as fun for him to make as it was for her. Max even went in game to a gnome workshop and had them craft a skateboard for her. Before long, Will added her character to the Parties drawing. Her long red hair whisked in the breeze, perpetually in motion atop her skateboard.

There was a bit of tension, as far as the boys were concerned, at least first. There was almost this strange silent battle between Lucas and Dustin over which one would eventually win Max's heart. Just as sweet as it was stupid and ridiculous. However, fortune would favor Lucas, when max started sitting next to him during lunch, and not-so-

covertly holding his hand under the D&D table.

El took everyone out to that old oak tree one day in summer before high school, and added a sixth name to its trunk.

There must be something magical about that tree, because that was the day Lucas asked Max to be his girlfriend.

Lucas and Max. Max and Lucas. Six party members. Sharing everything, talking constantly, opening up, admitting truths, sharing secrets, teasing each other, falling in love.

An unstoppable force of nature, ready to take on whatever life had to offer, together. They spent another summer of blissful adolescence, basking in the summer sun, and spending time preparing for their biggest challenge yet: High School.

I hope you enjoyed chapter one! Im not sure how long this story is going to be yet, but I dont think its going to be longer than ten chapters. Its also going to span 10 years (from middle school - college) so moments move really quickly!

2. The Beginning Of The End

High School.

A virtual battlefield of gossip, and social tyranny. More peers, bigger classrooms, sadistic teachers, nastier bullies, stricter hierarchy, and somehow even worse school lunches.

The party readied themselves with their best weapons at the forefront: El and Max. El could kick anyone's ass, she proved that well enough, and Max could talk her way out of any situation.

They were as excited as they were fearful. Being another year older meant more freedom. They were closer to driving, to getting jobs, to becoming adults and achieving their goals. More rigorous classes meant that studying might actually be a challenge, one they were eager to take on. More elective options meant Will could take ceramics *and* drawing, and that Dustin could finally be the light tech for theater. Mike was pleased to learn the AV club needed a new president, and Lucas was considering trying out for baseball. Max was just stoked that the schools quad had great curbs and hills for skating on, and El was glad she shared almost all of her classes with her friends.

Puberty hit the group like a brick wall, especially the boys. Dustin's chubby cheeks were replaced with slightly more angular ones, and all of his teeth had come in beautiful and straight. Will was more or less still pretty shrimpy, but his deep and wide set eyes, and finally outgrowing his bowl cut made him strikingly handsome.

Probably the most noticeable differences had been in Lucas and Mike. Lucas was no longer gangly and baby faced. He had become muscular over the long summer months of lawn mowing and hedge trimming. It earned him a lot of attention from other girls at school, but Max could scare them away with a well placed scowl. Max herself had developed a beautiful rosy tan, and her hair was brighter than ever. They were a gorgeous couple, unafraid to stand up for each other, and not even slightly concerned about hiding their public displays of affection.

As for Mike, he had spouted like a weed. By the time Winter of 85' rolled around he was pushing 6' and still growing. It got the point where El had to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him (not that she cared). His rounded face had become chiseled, and his fluffy hair had become erratically curly. The only thing that never really changed where the sprinkling of freckles on his cheeks that El would trace whenever they held each other.

El herself was earning more attention from others in school. El was beautiful, painfully so. She always had been, but now that she was older, and her baby-face had faded, it was ridiculous. El never really seemed to care or even notice, but Mike sure as hell did. He would see the way boys gawked at her, and wrap his arm a little tighter around her waist in the halls. Or whenever someone would be leering over her at her locker, he would run up from behind and surprise her with a kiss.

He got picked on. People would ask him how he ever got someone like El, and in truth, he didn't even know. She was just so *perfect*. So funny, and nice. So thoughtful and insightful. So compassionate, and intelligent. It made his head spin to think that *he* was the one that got to hold her hand, and walk her home, and love her.

But whenever he would start to doubt himself, she was always there. To reassure him, and let him know exactly how she felt. To her it just made sense. Mike, The Party, all of them. They were the perfect friends, and it was painful to even to imagine something splitting them apart.

It just seemed to unfathomable.

One huge upside to being in highschool, is the freedom that comes with being old enough to get a real job, and drive a real car.

Lucas and Max both monopolized the lawn mowing industry. All of the old and lazy people in Hawkins had sharp, grassy yards, and meticulously groomed gardens thanks to them. When Max turned fifteen she got a handed down car from her step dad that meant way more adventures. The little orange hatchback broke down a lot, and most of her money went right back into it. But man, did she look cool driving up to school with El by her side.

Will took a part time job working with his mom at Melvald's. He enjoyed greeting customers and was one of the friendliest cashiers the store had ever had. Plus his mother was over the moon that they got to carpool and she could see him more. He spent most of his money on sketchbooks and the hottest new thing in the music technology: CD's.

El and Dustin worked part time at the library. Which mostly consisted of them hiding in less frequented sections to read returned books rather than actually putting the books away. It also meant Dustin could finally buy the big 1970's VW van he had wanted since he was little. It made for a lot of great camping trips and long drives to the city.

Mike worked at the local movie theater some days, and at the Radio Shack other days. He famously spread himself too thin, but he couldn't pass up the perks of getting free movie tickets *and* access to the latest technological advancements. When he turned fifteen his parents got him a sensible car that made for a lot of date nights and long talks with El out on romantic scenic overlooks.

Jobs aren't always fun, but when the benefit is making out in your new car after being able to pay for a real dinner, it's hard to complain.

As they got older, and time wore on, that obliviousness to pain faded. It seemed like one by one, they all had their demons to face.

Like when Max's step brother got kicked out during her sophomore year.

She had gone home with Lucas one afternoon in late fall. Hand in hand, and laughing with each other without a care in the world, they walked in on utter chaos that left the red-head reeling for months afterwards.

Billy and Neil, practically tearing the house apart in the fight to end all fights. Plates smashed, the TV broken. Her mother crying in the bathroom. They had turned to leave, when Billy turned on her. Or rather, on Lucas. He pinned him against the wall and screamed that

Lucas was the one tearing their family apart, and that he was getting Max into trouble. It was baseless, of course, but in Billy's mind, Lucas was who he needed to take his anger out on.

Max watched from the sidelines and screamed and slapped at Billy's arms and shoulder, begging him to let Lucas go. He did, but not until Lucas had a black eye and a busted lip.

Billy got kicked out, and Neil forbid Max from seeing Lucas anymore, as if that would solve whatever demented issues he had. With Billy gone, Neil's aggression shifted towards Max's mother, and even worse, sometimes to Max herself.

She never let her families backwards view of her relationship affect the way she left about Lucas. Hiding their love from her parents just made everything more exciting. It meant sneaking out, it meant Lucas hiding in her closet or under her bed when her mother checked on her while he was at her house late at night. It meant long car rides out of town and into the hills where no one could see or cared that they loved each other.

Will's demons came for him too. All his life he had this secret burning inside of him. A secret he could only tell El, and eventually Max because he knew they wouldn't care. It ate him up inside. Feeling like there was something wrong with him, or that the people he loved wouldn't understand, or would leave him once they found out. He became distant, detached, vacant, and haunted. Filling more and more sketchbooks with eery looking images of his own internal struggle.

His mother tried to get it out of him, tried to let him know that she would love him no matter what secret he might be hiding, but Will was too scared. He would sit in silence in class and look out the window, and try to push his feelings aside. The feelings of warmth and infatuation with the boy who sat in front of him in History. The one with the silky brown hair and the charming smile. The one who laughed whenever Will would make a joke under his breath that he thought no one could hear. The one who was dating a pretty girl, the way Will thought he was supposed to.

El and Max pleaded with him, begged him to open up. That his

friends would understand, that nothing could change. All he could do was promise he would think about, and wait for the right moment.

That moment never came. Not until it had festered inside of him and grown until it was bigger than he was, and he was bursting at the seams.

They were all sitting in Mike's basement. Mike and El on the couch, sharing a blanket and bowl of popcorn, Lucas, Max and Dustin lounging on the floor in a heated debate about Multi-universe theory, and Will, sitting alone at the table trying to draw and feeling like he was falling into a hole.

"I have something to tell you!" He blurted, face red and voice trembling.

Everyone stopped dead in their tracks, and turned to face their anxious friend. Max and El shared a knowing glance and smiled at him reassuringly.

"You have to promise that you won't hate me after I tell you. You have to swear." Will's voice was intent.

"Of course we promise, Will, we could never hate you." Mike gave him the same assured smile that El had.

"Okay..." Will took a deep shaky breath and closed his eyes. "I... I like boys... The way i'm supposed to like girls... Im gay. And I want to be able to share this part of myself with all of you because I don't think I can keep fighting it anymore."

No one said anything. Will kept his gaze at the ground, terrified to make eye contact. Terrified to see whatever expressions of disgust played across the faces of his best friends. A beat passed, and Will felt like he was going to burst in tears when Dustin of all people finally piped up.

"I'm proud of you Will." His voice was soft, not a common occurrence for him, and his eyes were kind. Will looked up to meet his gaze with a look of surprise.

"You... you're proud of me?"

"I know that cannot be an easy thing to open up about, but i'm happy you finally did." Dustin smiled back at him.

"Wait... finally?"

"We have... Kind of all known for awhile." Lucas added with a small voice.

"You did!?" Will shot El and Max accusing glances but they shrugged.

"We always figured I guess, but we wanted to let you come to us with it whenever you were ready." Mike beamed at his smaller friend.

"So you don't hate me?" Will's voice was thick with tears.

"We could never hate you, Will." Mike leaned forward to place an reassuring hand on Will's knee.

That night marked one of the biggest admissions in The Parties history. Another notch in the belt (so to speak) tying them together, binding them with faith and trust and unwavering love for each other. Will never worried about hiding things from his friends. None of them worried about hiding things, actually. Not anymore.

As the years progressed, and sophomore year turned into Junior, and another blissful summer turned into fall, that love never failed to grow. Sometimes strange, and sometimes crooked, but they grew.

Mike and El often seemed like the culmination of that devotion. A pair of best friends who read each other with mere wordless glances. Blissfully supportive and loving of each other no matter what circumstances they found themselves in.

Childlike admission of liking, and blushing at hands and gentle kisses turned into deep fiery love. Promises to stay together forever, whispered in the dark at night, in the passenger seats of cars, in each others rooms when they should be home sleeping. Innocent daydreams about being friends for the rest of their lives become a daunting and even frightening realization. Playing games and messing around became study, and planning a future as it sprawled out before them.

Kissing became routine. Loving each other became a given. Being in love became... difficult to understand.

That was when the final blow struck. The one that cut deep into their hearts. The one that seemed like they could never fix it, not even as a group, not even as lovers, because it was bigger than they were, and it meant more than they knew how to cope with.

It was the Summer of 88'. The summer before senior year. The last summer they would ever have that didn't have strings attached.

It was the summer of 88', when the fires started.

It had been small at first. Just a brush fire that got a little carried away when a farmer further up the river was burning what was left from his crops the months before. Just a standard burning, the kind he had done a thousand time before. The kind that every farmer does every season when it's time to clear out the fields before winter. It would have been fine. It *should* have been fine, but it wasn't.

It was an exceptionally dry summer, and one of the warmest on record. Couple that, with just the right wind speed, blowing in just the right direction, and within hours the entire forest surrounding the eastern side of his property was engulfed in hot orange flames.

You could smell the smoke for miles. El woke up out of her midday nap, curled up in Mike's arms on the couch in his basement to the smell. Together they ran through the house, checking every inch to make sure it wasn't them that was burning. When El finally looked outside, she saw the flickering of ash falling just out the window. Like snow. Like the most ominous, and heart-wrenchingly terrifying snow on a hot summer's day.

Mike flipped on the kitchen radio and listened in on the reports, that the fire was spreading fast, that firefighters were already on sight, that it was moving too quickly. El called Lucas, who had Max and Dustin at his house. Dustin called Will, and the Party convened at Mike's house less than 15 minutes later. It was like some strange unspoken plan passed between their eyes as they watched the ash fall, and Dustin choked on the smoke, and it burned Max's eyes.

They all wordlessly hopped in Mikes car, and drove west, towards the woods. The streets were mostly empty, save for the handful of other people standing on their lawns, shielding their eyes from the sun and staring into the sky. Mike stopped the car at the end of a long forgotten logging road deep in the wood, about 2 miles from where the fire was currently ravaging.

They got out of the car, all still in the suspended silence, and crossed through the woods the way they had a million times before. Following the same deer trails, stepping over the same mossy logs, and around the same boulders. The smoke was worse in the woods, and it was hard to imagine that every piece of ground they touched might soon succumb to the same fate as the woods further east.

They reached the same small bend in the river, where it was shallow and narrow, where they used the same log to cross that they had since they were children. The moss was worn down slick from years and years of use by The Party, and other teens in the area. It had once been a place where El and Max would sit and swing their legs, while their boyfriends splashed around below. It had once been a place where Will laughed so hard that he fell from atop it, and sprained his wrist. It had once been a place where it felt like nothing could ever go wrong.

Once on the other side, it was a 10 minute walk to the top of a cliff that overlooked the entire town. Trudging silently, moving quickly, just short of running to the perch. El was the first to reach the peak. Just as suddenly as she stepped out of the tree line, the entire valley came into view, as well as the river that tore through it. Her voice caught in her throat when she saw the flames burning on the other side.

Lucas climbed into a tree with his binoculars. Max and Dustin sat on a tall boulder, watching the fire helicopters dropping water and extinguisher across the landscape. Will, Mike and El stood on the edge of the hills slope, looking down at the chaos below. Even miles away you could feel the heat. You could smell the smoke. You could choke on it.

There were tears in their eyes as they watched the fire burn away the memories they had made in those woods. The one they had all played

in growing up. The one that sheltered them on rainy hikes. The one that served at a meeting point for sneak outs. The one that held them when they camped. The one El and Mike shared their first kiss in.

It was hard to tell through the smoke, but El made out the clearing that the tree was in. *Their* tree. The one with the initials and the physical representation of their bond. She could see the fire dance dangerously close to those trees. They sat in silence, waiting and watching, holding each other and pacing. It felt like the end of the world. It felt like the apocalypse. As they saw birds fleeing, and small groups of deer bounding into the water.

Eventually, the clearing, and their tree, were consumed.

Once the fire reached the river, it was easier to keep in from spreading. The wind shifted in their favor, pushing the flames into the water. Helicopters continued their downpour, sirens could still be heard in the distance. It seemed small, once it was all almost said and done with, and the sun began to set off to their right, and the smoke had cleared enough that you could actually take in the sight of the damage.

Everything was blackened, the air felt hot, but it was mostly over. So why did it feel so painful? It was just a tree, and they would love each other without it, so why did it scare each of them so badly? Why did it feel like the beginning of some ending? Like their story was coming to a close?

Because symbols are powerful things. And you put a lot of faith in them even when you don't mean too. Because losing the forest they had grown up in, felt like losing a friend.

There was a somber energy that blanketed the town after the fire. Two volunteers were in the hospital, and a firefighter from the next town over died when he walked too far into the woods. The landscape for miles were blackened on the outskirts of town. 1280 acres of farmland and forest demolished. Four barns and a historic farmhouse gone.

Nothing in the party changed directly. They still saw each other

everyday, and hung out every weekend, but it was becoming clear that their childhood was over.

There was a day, right before school started, that that fact became all too clear for El.

Sitting in Mike's basement, reading lazily as she lounged on the floor, her head resting in his lap as he studied. She moved her book to look at him and smiled. He often bit his lips when he focused. She saw the crease in his forehead as he hastily erased another equation he couldn't quite figure out. He had taken summer courses, something Max referred to as 'Top tier nerd behavior', but El was proud of him. Mike has determined to always push himself, to always learn and grow.

He groaned and erased something, and flipped back through his textbook.

"Hey, why don't you take a break. We can go get ice cream or something and you can clear your head." She reached up and twisted her finger around one of his messy curls.

He smiled back at her, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I can't El, I have to finish this right now or it will be late."

"It's not due until tomorrow at like... noon. You can take a little break." She poked her favorite freckle on his cheek but he was already looking back at his paper, only grumbling in reply. "Come oon, Mike, summer is almost over, you have worked so hard, lets go goof off for a little bit."

He was ignoring her at this point, but she wasn't going to give up. She rolled off of him and sat up, wrapping her arms and legs around him from behind like a koala (as he so often called it). She rested her chin on his shoulder and looked over his messy notes. It made her head spin just from looking at it. She was always more of a literature buff, and his crazy mathematical physics always blew her mind.

"Miikkee" She drug his name out. "Michael." She hugged him harder and poked his sides. "Mike Wheeler if you don't stop looking at that paper I will tickle torture you until you pee your pants like that one

time."

Finally he dropped his pen and pinched the bridge of his nose. "First of all, we were ten. Second of all, I really need to study and you are being super distracting and its making me mad."

"You usually like it when I distract you." El teased, thinking fondly on all the times she had saved a stressed out Mike from his own frustration.

"Okay well now isn't one of those times. Can you please get off of me?" His voice was uncharacteristically cold.

El scooted away from him and shifted to sit across from him on the floor. "Why are you being so rude? It's literally just homework. For a class you didn't even *have* to take."

"Because I want to get into a good college and extra classes like this look good on college applications." Mike had fully shoved his papers away from his lap and was looking at her with the exasperation usually only reserved for Lucas and Dustin.

"Mike, you are the smartest person I know. You don't need to stress yourself out so badly over one stupid class. You will get into a great school with or without going and taking a break with me. Besides, that's an entire year away." El felt her own temper start to come out. She wasn't exactly the post patient person in the world, and Mike was almost worse than she was.

"El, we can't all live at our parents house forever."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, that im stressing about this because I want to get out of here as fast as I can. I just want to be able to go to a school that I love, and leave this shit town behind. I'm sorry you can't understand that."

Her jaw dropped. Sure things in Hawkins weren't the best. And sure his parents made him feel suffocated and isolated all at the same time, but it wasn't that bad was it? Not enough for him to be blowing up and fuming over this.

"Whatever Mike. i'm going home. Get the stick out of your ass and call me when you realize you are being ridiculous." And with that El grabbed her bag and walked out of the basement door.

She waited at the edge of his yard for a few minutes, despite the heat and humidity. Usually whenever they got into arguments like this, Mike just needed a second to realize he was being hurtful and would come apologize. But he never came out. She stared down the hill at the closed basement door and felt her blood boil until she turned on her heels and stomped home.

It was just a little argument. Maybe they had both said some things that were uncalled for. El tried to rationalize it until she was blue in the face. But he never called, and she went to bed feeling like something had broken.

She realized they were not kids anymore. That maybe Mike was right, and she really just didn't understand. It felt like something was changing. Like the beginning of the end.